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Arms inquiry focuses on shadowy network

By Rita McWilliams
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A private network of ex-U.S. military and ex-CIA officials aiding the Nicaraguan resistance is being thrust into the limelight as the Justice Department widens its inquiry into sales of weapons to Iran.

The men named by sources as likely to be questioned in the investigation are known as committed anti-communists who — through their U.S. government service — would be familiar with money-laundering and other covert techniques that apparently were used in what Attorney General Edwin Meese III said was a diversion of funds to the rebels through Swiss bank accounts.

Retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, known as a savvy businessman with wide experience in arms sales and supply lines, is said to be a key player in the Iran-to-Nicaragua chain.

Gen. Secord, currently an executive at Stanford Technologies, an arms-trading company in Vienna, Va., is reported to have worked closely with Lt. Col. Oliver North, the National Security Council aide who was fired this week, in supplying arms to Iran and the rebel forces in Nicaragua.

In the 1970s, Gen. Secord was a U.S. military attache stationed in Iran. Recently, he was involved in arranging the deal for the United States to sell AWACS, advanced-warning planes with sophisticated radar, to Saudi Arabia.

In "Manhunt," a book by Peter Maas, Gen. Secord was linked to renegade CIA agent Edwin Wilson, who sold Col. Muammar Qaddafi's Libyan regime, among other things, 40,000 pounds of C-4 plastic explosive and sophisticated miniature timing devices.

Gen. Secord, a West Point graduate, was assistant secretary of defense in charge of Middle East Arms sales in the first years of the Reagan administration. He is reported to have accompanied former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane and Col. North, when they flew to Iran in May to negotiate with representatives of the Iranian government. Gen. Secord, through a lawyer, has denied any involvement.

The investigators also are expected to question retired Army Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, who has been the chief American fund-raiser for the rebels during the two-year period after Congress cut off aid in 1984. He is the leader of the World Anti-Communist League. Gen. Singlaub was ousted as chief of staff of U.S. forces in South Korea in 1977 when he publicly criticized President Jimmy Carter.

The continuing investigation also is expected to include several men close to Vice President George Bush, a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Those include Doland P. Gregg, Mr. Bush's national security adviser, a former CIA specialist in Far Eastern affairs; and Max Gomez, also known as Felix Rodriguez, a veteran of the Bay of Pigs invasion who reliable sources say has been a long-term CIA agent. He was a director of the American-backed rebel supply operations at Ilopango Air Base in El Salvador.

The American who was aboard a plane shot down in Nicaragua, Eugene Hasenfus, identified Mr. Gomez as "Condor," one of two agents running the rebel supply operation referred to in a code list captured by the Nicaraguan government.

Also expected to be questioned in the probe is Robert Owen, staff director for the Institute on Terrorism and Sub-National Conflicts, and a former aide to Sen. Dan Quayle, Indiana Republican. Mr. Owen's business card was found in the downed plane.

Others expected to be questioned by Justice officials include arms dealer Thomas Clines and William G. Langton, president of Southern Air Transport Inc., a Miami-based air freight company owned by the CIA from 1960 to 1973 and known to continue to handle CIA contracts. The company serviced the plane carrying Mr. Hasenfus and was involved in arms transport to Iran in November 1985, nearly two months before President Reagan authorized any shipments.

Michael Ledeen, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies of Georgetown University, was reported by The Washington Times to be the architect of U.S. overtures to reopen contact with Iran.

Mr. Ledeen has said that as a National Security Council consultant he helped establish some initial contacts between the two governments, but has denied any involvement with the arms deal. An answering machine at Mr. Ledeen's home announced the arival of a baby boy yesterday and said he was taking a week off from foreign policy questions.

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